Moral Relativism, Religion, Darwinism, and Unethical Behavior

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with research distinction* in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University.

By

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Abstract

The current study investigates the psychological mechanisms involved in unethical behavior, and the role moral relativism plays. It is known that when exposed to religious material, cheating behaviors decrease, and when exposed to moral relativistic material, cheating behavior increases. In light of this, two questions proposed are whether or not religion decreases moral relativism and thus leads to a decrease in cheating behavior, as well as if thoughts of evolution or Darwinism induces thoughts of moral relativism, which in turn leads to an increase in unethical behavior. Ultimately, this study looks to answer whether or not moral relativism is a mediator for unethical behavior. This hypothesis was tested using an online questionnaire. Participants (n =250) were randomly assigned to the religious, Darwinism/evolution or control condition, and then completed questionnaires measuring moral relativism and willingness to engage in unethical behaviors. Results showed that age was correlated with willingness to engage in unethical behavior. There was an indication that the Darwinism/evolution condition was associated with increased unethical behavior, while there was no effect for the religion condition. There was no significant mediation effect of cheating behavior via moral relativism. Future research can be done looking at how thinking about evolutionary theory leads one to engage in unethical behavior.

Introduction

The act of cheating is not unknown to most people, in fact whether one would admit it or not, most everyone could think of a time they had been tempted to cheat, whether on a test or a friendly board game with friends. Reports of cheating behavior have steadily increased with time. In fact, approximately 20% of college students admitted to cheating in high school during the 1940s, and today between 75%-98% of surveyed college students reported having cheated in high school (Jaffe, D. L., 2016). This high proportion of individuals engaging in unethical behavior emphasizes the importance of studying unethical behavior and what could be driving it. One potential explanation for why cheating behavior has increased over time is a change in values or ethics over time. It has been found that the values one holds can be a contributing factor to cheating (Pulfrey and Butera, 2013).

One set of values that is related to unethical behavior is moral relativism. Moral relativism is defined by believing moral truths are subjective, based on individual cultural traditions and histories rather than on universal, objective moral truths. An example of this can be seen in how some cultures require women to engage in alteration of their genitalia. Most outside cultures would view this as wrong, but for the people who grew up in this culture with its traditions, it is not seen as wrong. The opposite of moral relativism is moral absolutism, stating that there is objective "right" and "wrong", similar to the statement "2 + 2 = 4", and that these rights and wrongs are not a matter of opinion or culture (Rai and Holyoak, 2013; Harman, 1975).

Moral relativistic and absolutist ideals are not always set in stone; people can be influenced to lean more towards one or the other. For example, with increasing exposure to other cultures, individuals come to believe that morality is more relative than absolute. This is based on a study that found that those who had visited a wide range of countries exhibited higher levels of cheating than individuals who had only traveled to one or two other countries (Lu, Quoidbach, Gino, Chakroff, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2017). This study suggests that because those who visited many countries also experienced many cultures, they were more likely to increase in their moral relativism. Consistent with this interpretation, it has been found that when exposed to a moral relativist perspective by reading an argument that was in favor of a controversial cultural practice (e.g. a culturally relativist view), participants were significantly more likely to cheat at a die roll game than those exposed to a moral absolutist perspective. This experimental data suggests that being exposed to material fostering a moral relativist perspective can have an impact on people's immoral behaviors such as cheating (Rai and Holyoak 2013). Thus, whether being exposed to foreign cultures, thinking about experiences in foreign cultures or reading views supportive of moral relativism, increases in moral relativism can increase unethical behavior.

Conversely, studies have shown that exposure to religious material can induce moral absolutist ideals. In a study designed to investigate the relationship between religious concepts and moral absolutism, it was found that priming participants with religious concepts via a scrambled sentence task adapted from Shariff & Norenzayan (2007), led to more moral absolutist responses to various

moral dilemmas (Yilmaz & Bahcekapili, 2015). This study indicates that exposure to religious material can lead participants to increase moral absolutist values. Because being religious has declined over time (Pew Research Center, 2015) this could be an explanation for why unethical behaviors such as cheating have increased over time. Accordingly, previous research has also shown that when primed with religious words, participants cheated significantly less on a subsequent task (Randolph-Seng & Neilson, 2007). However, these investigators did not assess whether or not the increase in ethical behavior after being primed with religious words was driven by decreases in moral relativism. Thus, the present study addresses the question, is the explanation for religion decreasing unethical behavior due to religion decreasing moral relativism?

In addition to the decline of religious beliefs over the last century, there has been an increasing adoption of the view that humans were not divinely created, but rather evolved from other animals (Pew Research Center, 2013). This raises the question as to whether or not increased acceptance of evolutionary theory has led to changes in ethical behavior. In particular, one implication of evolution is that morals are not based on divine precepts, but are culturally specific. Thus, increased awareness of and belief in evolutionary theory may increase moral relativist beliefs and thus lead to greater unethical behavior. In light of this, a second research question is do thoughts of Darwinism and evolution increase moral relativistic thoughts and thus lead to an increase in unethical behavior?

One way investigators have studied the effects of religion on behavior is to utilize priming designs. In a meta-analysis conducted to investigate the robustness

of four types of religious priming (n = 93 studies) on both behavioral and psychological responses, the average effect size of the difference between religiously primed and control groups was g = 0.40, (Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan 2015). Thus, this meta-analysis offers strong evidence that religious priming can influence behavior. Therefore, in this thesis, participants were primed with material about God or evolution by reading passages from Wikipedia on the respective topic. The effects of this priming on moral relativism and self-reported willingness to engage in unethical behavior were assessed.

Method

Participants

Workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk were recruited on the Amazon Turk website to participate in the study (127 women, 122 men, M_{age} = 38.4 years, age range: 22- 75 years). The racial demographics of the sample was: 85% Caucasian, 8% African American, 8% Hispanic, 4% American Indian or Alaska Native, Navajo, Mayan, Tlingit, 8% Asian, 2% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 4% Other.

Research Design

The study consisted of three conditions: a religion condition, a Darwinism/evolution condition, and a control condition. Participants read short passages (~50 words) from Wikipedia on each topic. They then completed the dependent measures assessing moral relativism and willingness to engage in unethical behavior.

Measures

Materials used for the independent variable were passages drawn from Wikipedia. The religion passage was previously used by Kupor and colleagues (2015) and described the attributes of God being all-knowing and all-powerful. The control condition was also drawn from this prior study (Kupor, Laurin, & Levav, 2015) and described the defining characteristics of a planet. To be consistent with this prior work, the evolution condition was also drawn from Wikipedia, specifically from entries for "Darwinism" and "Evolution." Following the passage, each participant was asked a simple question based on the passage as a manipulation check to ensure that they did indeed read the passage. The text of the passages participants read are in the Appendix.

To measure the degree to which each participant possessed moral relativistic views, the 10 moral relativism items of the Ethical Position Questionnaire (EPQ) were used. In responding to this questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed on a 9-point Likert scale to questions such as, "what is ethical varies from one situation and society to another", and "different types of morality cannot be compared to as 'rightness'" (Forsyth, 1980).

To assess willingness to engage in unethical behavior, two measures were used. The Self-Reported Inappropriate Negotiation Strategies Scale (SINS) (Robinson et. al 2000) scale asked participants to rate the level of appropriateness of each statement on a 7-point likert scale. An example of a statement from this scale includes asking how appropriate it was to "make an opening demand that is far

greater than what you really hope to settle for". Lu, Quoidbach, Gino, Chakroff, Maddux, & Galinsky (2017) used this scale in order to assess immoral intentions, As an additional measure of willingness to engage in unethical behavior, participants were asked to respond to a single question drawn from prior work (Rai and Holyoak, 2013). This ethical purchase question was: "Imagine you were at the grocery store and saw an item that you regularly purchase but whose price has clearly been mismarked. Instead of 4 dollars, it is listed as only costing 4 cents." Participants were asked how likely they would be to pay the cheaper mismarked price rather than the correct full price on a 7-point scale.

Participant's completed background questionnaires in order to assess the participants' sex/gender, age, political ideologies, socioeconomic status and educational experiences. In addition, the Duke University Religion Index (DUREL) (Koenig et. al 2010), and Intuitive Religious Belief Scale (Gervais and Norenzayan, 2012) were used to measure religiosity. These questionnaires aimed to measure participant's overall belief in God, as well as how important religion is to them and how often they partake in religious activities.

Procedure

Participants were recruited on the Amazon Mechanical Turk website. After giving consent, participants were randomly assigned to the religious condition, Darwinism/evolution condition, or control condition. After reading the explicit prime specific to their condition, participants completed the Ethics Position Questionnaire, the SINS Scale, and the Ethic Pricing Question, as well as the

background questionnaires. Once finished, the participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation and compensated $2.00 USD for their time.

Statistical Analyses

In order to detect differences between conditions a one-way ANOVA was used. Meditation analyses were conducted using the SPSS macro PROCESS, written by Andy Hayes (Hayes, 2017).

Results

Manipulation checks showed good compliance. Overall, participants responded accurately (moral relativist condition = 98%, religious condition = 100%, control condition = 90%). Those that responded inaccurately were dropped from the study.

As an initial characterization of the data, the relationship between the demographic variables and the dependent measures was assessed. Age was associated with each of the dependent measures. Those who reported an older age had lower scores on the EPQ ($r(249) = -0.167$, $p = 0.008$), the SINS scale ($r(249) = -0.191$, $p = 0.002$), and willingness to make an unethical purchase ($r(249) = -0.291$, $p = 0.000$). These findings indicate that participants of older ages were less likely to report a willingness to engage in unethical behavior. Because of this relationship between age and the dependent variables, age was included as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

Sex was correlated with the SINS scale score ($r(249) = -0.19$, $p = 0.003$), but not the EPQ ($r(249) = 0.07$, $p = 0.29$) or unethical purchase question ($r(249) = -0.01$, $p = 0.83$). Therefore, sex was added as a covariate to the analyses for the SINS scale.

A one-way ANCOVA was conducted using the covariates described above. There was no effect of condition on the EPQ ($F(2, 248) = 0.813$, $p = 0.52$), willingness to make a hypothetical unethical purchase ($F(2, 248) = 1.40$, $p = 0.26$; Figure 1), or overall score on the SINS scale ($F(2, 248) = 0.85$, $p = 0.43$; Figure 2).

Interestingly, follow up exploratory analyses comparing just the Darwinism/evolution condition to the control condition showed a relationship that approached significance in regards to the SINS scale ($F(1, 167) = 2.88$, $p = 0.092$), as well as the Ethics Pricing question ($F(1, 168) = 3.08$, $p = 0.081$), but not the EPQ ($F(1, 168) = 5.73$, $p = 0.02$).

The mediation analyses showed that the indirect effect of the Darwinism/evolution manipulation on unethical purchase question via moral relativism was not significant ($b = -0.03$, 95% CI [-0.18, 0.028]). Similarly, for the SINS scale there was no evidence of mediation [$b = -1.3$, t=-0.94, p = 0.34; 95% CI [-4.02, 1.41] via moral relativism.

Discussion

The first finding was that age was a significant factor in cheating behavior in that older adults were less likely to cheat. This supports the notion that cheating behavior has increased over time, as discussed in the introduction section (Jaffe, D. L., 2016). Although a conservative test of the differences between all conditions was not significant, when just the Darwinism/evolution and control condition were compared, the difference approached significance. This suggests a possibility that being exposed to Darwinian or evolutionary theories could make a person more likely to engage in unethical behavior. There was no evidence of

mediation by moral relativism for any of the conditions.

One possible limitation of the study could be the content of the religion condition. Results trended more towards significance once the religion condition was removed, and only the moral relativist and control condition were compared. This suggests that the content in the Darwinian material in the moral relativist condition was enough to elicit an effect, but the content in the religion condition may not have been. Previous research has shown that when primed with forgiving attributes of God, participants stole more money for solving anagrams than those who were primed with a punishing attribute of God (DeBono, Shariff, Poole, Muraven 2017). Perhaps the lack of priming specific conceptions of God in the religious condition could explain why the results were not replicated as seen in previous studies on religion and unethical behavior.

Lastly, a possible limitation in the dependent measures could have manifested by participants answering questions on immoral behavior in ways that would appear socially desirable, rather than answers that were true for them. Future studies could employ dependent measures where participants are given the opportunity to cheat and/or behave immorally, and use this as an objective measure for cheating behavior.

Overall results were consistent with the notion that cheating behavior has increased over time, though moral relativism may not have been the mediator between changes in acceptance of Darwinism and evolutionary theory or the decline in religious beliefs . This opens up possibilities for future research investigating factors that could be driving this change such as reasons why evolutionary theories

could lead individuals to be less ethical.

Figures

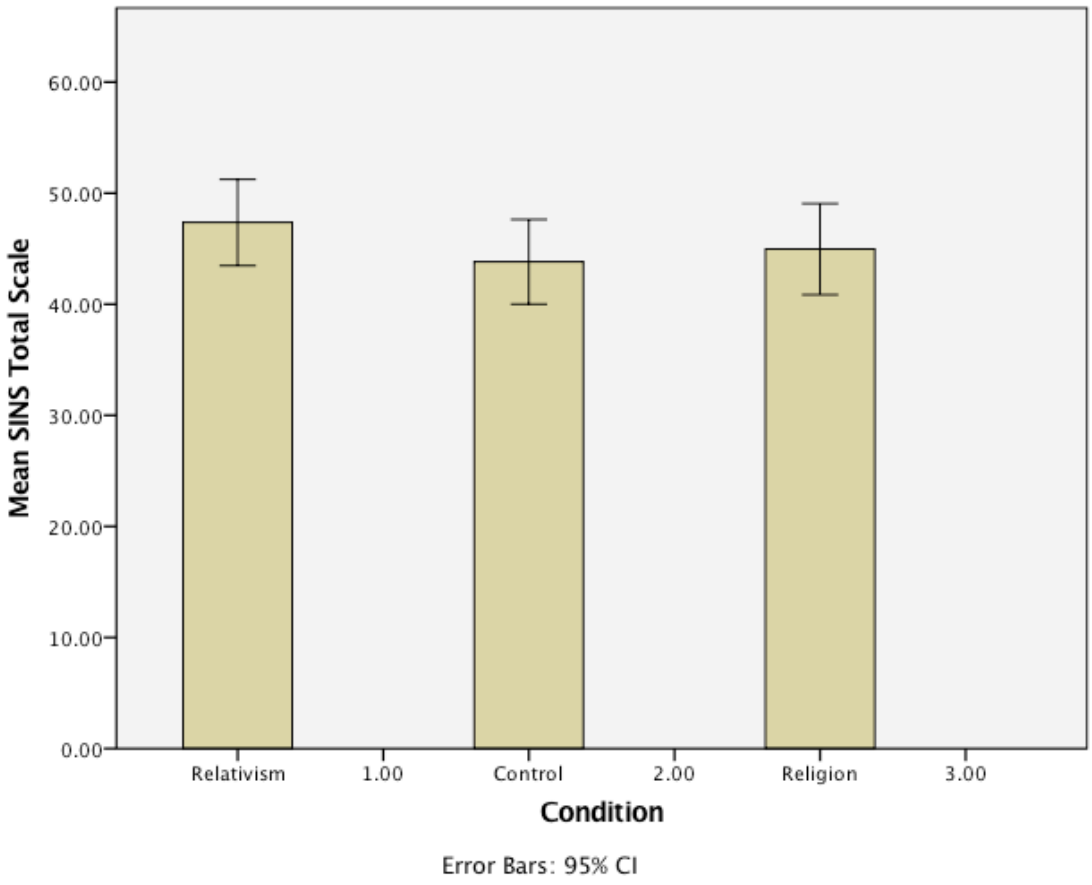

Figure 1. The relationship between experimental condition and respondent's score on the Self-Reported Inappropriate Negotiation Strategies Scale (Robinson et. al 2000).

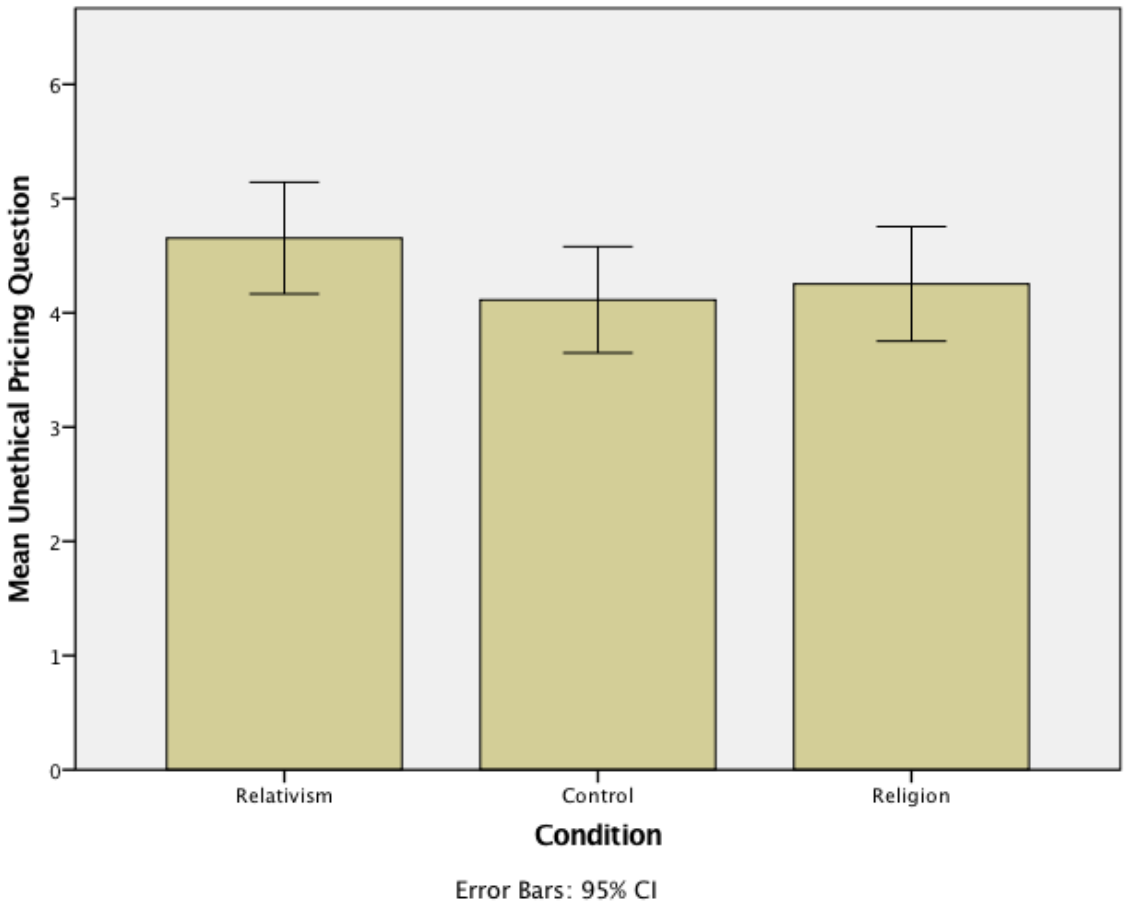

Figure 2. The relationship between experimental condition and responses to the question on willingness to engage in an unethical purchase (Rai & Holyoak, 2013).

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Appendix

Religious Condition Passage (Kupor, Laurin, & Levav, 2015)

God is often thought of as a supreme being. Theologians have described God as having many attributes, including omniscience (infinite knowledge), omnipotence (unlimited power), omnipresence (present everywhere), and omnibenevolence (perfect goodness). God has also been conceived as being incorporeal (immaterial), a personal being, and the 'greatest conceivable existence'"

Control Condition Passage (Kupor, Laurin, & Levav, 2015)

In 2006, the International Astronomers' Union passed a resolution outlining three conditions for an object to be called a planet. First, the object must orbit the sun; second, the object must be a sphere; and third, it must have cleared the neighborhood around its orbit. Pluto does not meet the third condition, and thus is not a planet"

Darwinism/evolution Passage

Darwinism is a theory of biological evolution developed by the English naturalist Charles Darwin and others, stating that all species of organisms arise and develop through the natural selection of small, inherited variations that increase the individual's ability to compete, survive, and reproduce. All organisms on Earth, including humans, are descended from a common ancestor." (Adapted from Wikipedia entries for "Darwinism" and "Evolution").

Ethics Position Questionnaire (Forsyth 1980):

11. There are no ethical principles that are so important that they should be a part of any code of ethics.

12. What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another.

13. Moral standards should be seen as being individualistic; what one person considers to be moral may be judged to be immoral by another person.

14. Different types of morality cannot be compared as to "rightness."

15. Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved since what is moral or immoral is up to the individual.

16. Moral standards are simply personal rules that indicate how a person should behave, and are not be be applied in making judgments of others.

17. Ethical considerations in interpersonal relations are so complex that individuals should be allowed to formulate their own individual codes.

18. Rigidly codifying an ethical position that prevents certain types of actions could stand in the way of better human relations and adjustment.

19. No rule concerning lying can be formulated; whether a lie is permissible or not permissible totally depends upon the situation.

20. Whether a lie is judged to be moral or immoral depends upon the circumstances

Self-Reported Inappropriate Negotiation Strategies Scale (Robinson et. al 2000):

1. Make an opening demand that is far greater than what you really hope to settle for

2. Convey a false impression that you are in absolutely no hurry to come to a negotiated agreement, thereby trying to put time pressure on your opponent to concede quickly

3. Make an opening demand so high/low that it seriously undermines your opponent's confidence in his/her ability to negotiate a satisfactory settlement

4. Attempt to get your opponent fired from his/her position so that a new person will take his/her place

5. Threaten to make your opponent look weak or foolish in front of a boss or others to whom he/she is accountable, even if you know that you won't actually carry out the threat

6. Talk directly to the people who your opponent reports to, or is accountable to, and tell them things that will undermine their confidence in your opponent as a negotiator

7. Promise that good things will happen to your opponent if he/she gives you what you want, even if you know that you can't (or won't) deliver these things when the other's cooperation is obtained

8. In return for concessions from your opponent now, offer to make future concessions, which you know you will not follow through on

9. Guarantee that your constituency will uphold the settlement reached, although you know that they will likely violate the agreement later

10. Intentionally misrepresent information to your opponent in order to strengthen your negotiating arguments or position

11. Intentionally misrepresent the nature of negotiations to your constituency in

order to protect delicate discussions that have occurred

12. Deny the validity of information which your opponent has that weakens your negotiating position, even though that information is true and valid

13. Intentionally misrepresent the progress of negotiations to your constituency in order to make your own position appear stronger

14. Gain information about an opponent's negotiating position by paying your friends, associates, and contacts to get this information for you

15. Gain information about an opponent's negotiation position by cultivating his/her friendship through expensive gifts, entertaining or 'personal favors'

16. Gain information about an opponent's negotiating position by trying to recruit or hire one of your opponent's teammates (on the condition that the teammate bring confidential information with him/her)